

Griffes' Poem: Considerations about Performance Practice Issues

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Poem by Charles Tomlinson Griffes¹ is one of the most-loved pieces in the American flute repertoire. With all its popularity, the work has been a target of arguments concerning wrong notes, cadenzas, and the validity of Barrère's edition. Flutists struggle with these questions, wondering which answer is closest to Griffes' intent.

Poem was written at the instigation of the eminent French-American flutist Georges Barrère (1876-1944), who was an admirer of Griffes' music and his close friend for many years. The work had its premiere on Sunday afternoon, November 16, 1919, at New York's Aeolian Hall, with Barrère as soloist accompanied by the New York Symphony conducted by Walter Damrosch.

Rehearsal of the *Poem* took place in due course, and Griffes attended, listening to its 'sound,' conferring with Barrère, and revising, cutting, and rescoring. On the 16th, the piece was performed. *Poem* for flute and orchestra, by Charles T. Griffes, following d'Indy's *Symphony No. 3*, came second in the program. It was received with uproarious approbation. The *New York Tribune* said next day: Compositions for the flute, even when played by such a splendid musician as Georges Barrère do not as a rule give rise to wild enthusiasm, yet yesterday's audience applauded the work and the soloist for several minutes.²

¹ Charles Tomlinson Griffes was born on September, 1884, in Elmira, New York. He began his musical studies in his hometown. His piano teacher, Mary Selena Broughton, impressed by his precocious talent and ability, suggested that he go to Europe to continue his studies. In 1907, after spending five years abroad, Charles Griffes returned to the United States. He taught music at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York, for the remainder of his short life. He was also an active pianist in New York City, performing as both soloist and accompanist.

During his stay in Germany, Griffes had become acquainted with the music of Debussy and Ravel. This contact had an impact on Griffes' style; he identified with the language and tone colors of the impressionists. Although he had a difficult time gaining recognition and financial support in the beginning of his career, after 1910 his popularity and success began to increase. Eventually he was nationally recognized.

In 1919, Griffes' health began to decline. The end of that year was especially difficult for him. His last public appearance was in New York at a Boston Symphony Orchestra concert on December 4.¹ Shortly thereafter, Griffes entered the Loomis Sanatorium in Loomis, New York. He underwent two lung operations for tuberculosis, but never recovered. He died at New York Hospital on April 8, 1920, less than six months after *Poem's* premiere.

At the end of 1919, Griffes became seriously ill. Despite his poor health and inability to work, Schirmer insisted on having *Poem* printed. At that point, Griffes sent a letter to Schirmer explaining his situation:

I will leave tomorrow for Loomis Sanatorium, Loomis, New York. Any important information you can send me there, but as yet I cannot write myself nor do any work at all so please don't send me any more proofs. Will have to let the piano version of the flute piece go for a while as it is absolutely impossible to do anything. It will be one of the first things I shall do when I can work at all again.³

Griffes underwent two lung operations for the tuberculosis, and did not go back to work again.

Poem is most frequently performed today in Barrère's arrangement for flute and piano. There are a few other arrangements of this piece. The original version for flute and orchestra was not published until 1951 by G. Schirmer, Inc. because a piano version of the piece "would be more marketable and therefore publication of the original [for] flute and orchestra would have to wait."⁴ The other arrangements are: for violin and piano, by Hugo Kortschak;⁵ for flute and band, by James Thornton; an arrangement for flute and band by William L. Montgomery; and a recently-released version for flute and piano by James Galway and Phillip Moll.⁶

Griffes' autograph full score manuscript, thought lost for many years, reappeared in late 1979. It was donated to the New York Public Library by an anonymous friend in Spain.

Despite the evidence that Griffes did not make a piano version of *Poem*, some speculation still arises because of an account by Marion Bauer which states: "The memorial opened with the 'Poem for Flute,' played by Nicholas Kouloukiss with the composer's piano arrangement played by Walter Golde."⁷ Ms. Bauer attended the memorial concert on November 24, 1920. Ms. Bauer also states that she was a good friend of Griffes, and that both of them promoted "modern" music concerts in order to premiere their new compositions. Why and how did she know that the piano version was composed by Griffes? And why was Barrère not present at that concert performing the piece himself? What is known today is that Ms. Bauer is the only source who tells us that Griffes himself wrote a piano version of *Poem*. All other evidence points to the contrary.

Each version of *Poem* is different. There are more than eighty discrepancies between Schirmer's flute and piano edition and the orchestral manuscript, including differences in articulations, tempi, and expression markings. The flute part of Barrère's edition is similar to the 1951 (Schirmer) full score, and both of them are different from the autograph. The orchestral parts of the 1951 full score are identical to the autograph. However, the flute part in the printed orchestral score almost always agrees with Barrère's edition.

The autograph score is located at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in New York City. It is a neatly penned manuscript used by the orchestra conductor. Certainly Barrère had a copy of the music that he used at his performances, but it has not been located. A

comparison between the Barrère flute and piano edition, the printed orchestral score, and the autograph follows. Performers are invited to draw their own conclusions.

- The piano reduction has lost some details of color and texture in order to make it playable. Some apparently important lines are completely omitted, like this two-measure phrase played by the celli beginning in measure 60 (see Example 1).
- The first note of beat 3 in measure 54 appears as a B-sharp in both the printed orchestral score and the manuscript. In this case, it is easy to conclude that the B-natural in measure 54 of Barrère's edition is simply a misprint.
- The rhythm of the first three notes in measure 64 of the printed orchestral score is eighth—dotted eighth—sixteenth (instead of straight eighth notes). This agrees with the autograph.
- This same dotted motif appears in measure 67 of the printed orchestral score on the first three notes. This differs from both the autograph and Barrère's edition, who agree on straight eighths.
- A difference in phrasing between Barrère's edition and the printed orchestral score can be found in measure 107. The printed orchestral score marks the phrase the same way as the autograph: first phrase ending on the first note of beat 3 (C-natural), second phrase beginning on the next note (G-natural).
- The rhythm in measure 110 of the flute part of the autograph differs that found in Barrère's edition. The trill does not start until the second beat (see Example 2).
- Former Barrère students state that Barrère himself asked students to play the downbeat of measure 113 as B-flat instead of B-natural. It is more comfortable to leave the thumb on the B-flat thumb position here, since it is needed in this position in the previous measure. However, the autograph clearly shows this to be a B-natural, and in all printed versions it appears as a B-natural.
- Measure 116 of the orchestral score shows the tempo marking to be *Allegro Scherzando* instead of *Più Mosso* (the autograph also shows *Allegro Scherzando*).
- The passage from measures 202 to 204 does not contain grace notes in the autograph.
- None of the double-dotted notes between measures 211-231 is consistent with the autograph. The autograph simply shows a dotted-eighthsixteenth motif.
- There are enharmonic pitch variants in some places between Barrère's edition and the orchestral score. These that are located in measures 212, 217, 218, 223, 233, 238, 258. The notes found in the printed orchestral score match those in the autograph.
- Measure 260 of the printed orchestral score marks one phrase ending on the next to the last note of the measure, and a new phrase beginning on the last note. This marking is the same in the autograph.
- The passage corresponding to measure 257-258 in Barrère's edition appears as one *ad libitum* measure in the autograph (see Example 3).
- In Griffes' score, the flute ends alone. In Barrère's edition, the soloist and piano finish together.

Despite so much argument, controversy still surrounds *Poem*. The work was written for Barrère — he also premiered it, worked with Griffes, and edited the first published version of the work. Because of these facts, is his edition the most reliable one? If so, should one disregard the

differences between his edition and what is found in the autograph? And should performers consider the oral tradition that has been attributed to Barrère himself, contradicting Barrère's own edition?

Considering all the facts, there is another point that should be brought into perspective: the phenomenon of musicological research and the urge to come back to original sources was not as popular in the beginning of the century as it is today. In an earlier time, to add a measure, a note, or embellishments was a common practice, needing no license from the composer to do it. Today, it is almost unthinkable that someone would alter a score to make it more comfortable for the fingers without asking the composer directly. When this is not possible, no changes are made. This might be the case for *Poem*.



Example 1a. Printed orchestral score, m. 60-62. Note the cello line, which is missing from the piano reduction (see Example 1b, below). "Poem" by Charles Griffes. Copyright © 1951 (renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP) International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



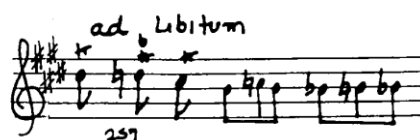
Example 1b. Piano reduction, Barrère edition, m. 60-62. "Poem" by Charles Griffes. Copyright © 1951 (renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP) International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



Example 2. Flute part, Barrère edition, m. 108-111. Rhythmic difference found in the autograph is written above measures 110-111. "Poem" by Charles Griffes. Copyright © 1951 (renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP) International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



Example 3a. Flute part, as in the Barrère edition, m. 257-258. Compare to Example 3b. "Poem" by Charles Griffes. Copyright © 1951 (renewed) by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP) International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.



Example 3b. Flute part, as in the autograph manuscript, m. 257. Compare to Example 3a.

Notes

1. Donna Andersen, in her book *The Works of Charles T. Griffes* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), quotes: "Griffes was present in New York's Carnegie Hall when the BSO played *The Pleasure Dome*, on 4 December, but barely had the energy to stand and acknowledge the applause that filled the hall."
2. Edward M. Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes: The Life of an American Composer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), p. 294.
3. Maisel, *Griffes*, p. 312.
4. Donna Anderson, "The Griffes Poem: A New Perspective," *National Flute Association Newsletter* 8/1, Fall 1982: p. 6.
5. There are few differences between the flute and the violin version: a B-sharp in measure 54, several different slur markings, plus indications of which string is to be played.
6. Published by G. Schirmer, Inc. in 1995. This article was written prior to the release of the Galway/Moll edition.
7. Marion Bauer, "Charles Tomlinson Griffes as I Remember him," *Musical Quarterly* 29/3 (July 1943), p. 379.